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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 006854

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2016  
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SUBJECT: THAI PM PLANS TO LIFT MARTIAL LAW

REF: BANGKOK 6816 (PLAN TO LIFT MARTIAL LAW)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Interim Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont told the Ambassador the RTG planned to lift martial law during the celebrations of the King's December 5 birthday, and might even take this step earlier. In a November 13 meeting with the Ambassador, Surayud indicated that he hoped to address unhelpful remarks by some political figures before lifting martial law. He said Thaksin should not return to Thailand before the country's next constitution is complete. Surayud responded in a positive tone when the Ambassador raised concern over freedom of the press and over the safety of the wife of a prominent missing lawyer. Surayud agreed that militants in southern Thailand had not responded positively to his efforts to promote reconciliation, but he did not indicate whether the lack of progress would influence his future steps. Surayud intends to travel to Burma but will also monitor discussion of Burma at the UN. He said he would seek to assist the USG on the resettlement of Burmese, Hmong, and North Korean refugees, but he also hoped to limit the influx of North Koreans into Thailand. End Summary.

LIFTING MARTIAL LAW

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¶2. (C) In a November 13 call on interim Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont, the Ambassador recounted his November 8 conversation with Council for National Security (CNS) Chairman Sonthi Boonyaratglin, in which Sonthi said the RTG planned to rescind martial law during the celebrations of the King's birthday (reftel). The Ambassador requested to confirm this plan directly with Surayud. Surayud replied simply saying "it should be OK, (even) before the King's birthday." The Ambassador asked what factors would influence the decision. Surayud replied there were "so many factors," including the disposition of former Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who in recent days made public statements antagonistic toward Surayud's administration and the CNS. Chavalit had also called for former PM Thaksin to be allowed to return home. Noting the desirability of defusing Chavalit, Surayud said, "We have to accommodate him."

TIMING THAKSIN'S RETURN

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13. (C) The Ambassador asked about Surayud's disposition toward Thaksin, noting Surayud's public comments on November 12 to the effect that Thaksin should remain outside of Thailand until a new elected government is in place. Surayud told the Ambassador that this would indeed be the most appropriate time for Thaksin's return. However, he would also consider it legitimate for Thaksin to return prior to the elections, if he wanted to carry out the duties of a political party leader under whatever provisions would exist under the new (not yet drafted) Constitution.

NEW CONSTITUTION: "NOT MY JOB"

14. (C) The Ambassador inquired about the ongoing formation of the National People's Assembly, which will then select the Constitutional Drafting Assembly. Surayud indicated he was not monitoring this process carefully and was not aware of the timelines for further developments, saying it was "not his job." (Note: Under the interim Constitution, the CNS nominates and the King appoints the NPA's members; the cabinet does not play a role in this procedure. End Note.)

MEDIA RESTRICTIONS

15. (C) Recalling Surayud's public remarks to the effect that the government was not constraining the Thai media, the Ambassador explained reports the Embassy had received that government officials had contacted officials of television station iTV and had sought to minimize coverage of the suicide of a taxi driver who opposed the September 19 coup. The government had also increased the presence of soldiers at

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iTV. Surayud said he had not been aware of this development.

CONCERN FOR MISSING LAWYER'S WIFE

16. (C) The Ambassador noted that Angkana Neelaphaijit, the wife (and presumed widow) of Somchai Neelaphaijit (a Muslim lawyer abducted by the security forces in 2004), had expressed concern about her safety to an Embassy officer. Progress in investigating Somchai's disappearance could lead the culprits to engage in further acts to intimidate those who might provide evidence against them. Surayud expressed concern on this matter and told his accompanying staff, "We should help (Angkana)."

SOUTHERN VIOLENCE

17. (C) Turning to the violence in southern Thailand, the Ambassador praised Surayud's efforts to advance reconciliation with the Muslim communities in that region. It seemed that the militants were responding with increased violence, however. Surayud said he had noted this trend. It appeared militants were trying to strengthen their grip on the local population, focusing on consolidating their hold at the village and sub-district level, and in the process driving non-Malays out of the region.

BURMA TRAVEL

18. (C) The Ambassador asked about Surayud's intention to travel to Burma. Surayud said he planned to go after the APEC meeting in Hanoi, although he did not mention whether he had a specific date arranged, or if he would travel directly from Vietnam to Burma. Surayud said he also would monitor Burma-related developments at the UN, implying that the tone emerging from UNSC consideration of Burma could influence Thailand's policy toward its neighbor.

REFUGEES

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¶9. (C) The Ambassador thanked Surayud for providing access to Burmese refugees in Thailand, noting our hopes soon to begin USG processing for resettlement from the largest of the camps (Mae La). Surayud said he had no qualms about U.S. resettling Burmese refugees -- or, for that matter, even Hmong.

¶10. (C) Recognizing RTG concerns over a possible influx of North Koreans to Thailand, the Ambassador said the USG nevertheless stood ready to resettle North Korean refugees. Surayud promised to "try my best" to cooperate on this issue. He indicated he would try to show flexibility on North Koreans already in Thailand, but he also would encourage Thai authorities to exert better control over the country's borders and prevent North Koreans from entering.  
BOYCE